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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BISHKEK 000198

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/CEN (GEHRENBECK)
DEPARTMENT FOR DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/28/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [KDEM](#) [KG](#)
SUBJECT: KYRGYZ OFFICIALS DEFEND PROPOSED CHANGES TO
RELIGION LAW

REF: A. BISHKEK 143
[1](#)B. 07 BISHKEK 946

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Classified By: Amb. Marie L. Yovanovitch, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: At a February 20 roundtable discussion on religious issues, Kyrgyz government officials said that a proposed Law on Religious Freedom was necessary to prevent religious conflict and combat the spread of extremism. Representatives from the Muftiate, the Russian Orthodox Church, and nearly every religious community in Kyrgyzstan attended and expressed views about the draft law and government controls. Minority Christian leaders continued to raise concerns about the restrictions, including a proposed requirement that each organization have a minimum of 200 members to be eligible to register -- a number well beyond the size of many smaller churches (Ref A). Some Christian leaders told us that their objections voiced during recent meetings with government officials had fallen on deaf ears. However, during a February 25 meeting with the Ambassador, State Agency for Religious Affairs (SARA) head Osmonaliyev said he personally disagreed with the 200-member requirement, and the issue would be discussed further at the next working group meeting. SARA now expects to submit a draft law to parliament by the end of March. End summary.

ANOTHER ROUNDTABLE ON DRAFT RELIGION LAW

[1](#)2. (C) On February 20, the Kyrgyz Russian Slavonic University hosted a roundtable entitled "Law and Faith: The Balance between Justice and Religion." Government officials presented a united front in support of the draft law. Recently appointed SARA head Kanybek Osmonaliyev said a new Law on Religious Freedom was a necessary counter-measure to conflict among religious organizations and the spread of extremism. Echoing statements made by his deputies,

Osmonaliyev argued that the current law was outdated and failed to govern properly religious entities. He promised that the new law would more clearly define the regulations for registering religious organizations, establish controls over religious educational institutions, and set parameters for the operation of missionary centers and missionaries' activities. Parliamentary Committee on Ethics, Ways, and Means chair Alisher Sabirov and presidential administration representative Nurlan Sadykov offered similar arguments in support of the proposed changes.

MINORITY CHRISTIANS VOICE THEIR CONCERNS

13. (C) Representatives from the Islamic Muftiate, the Russian Orthodox Church, and nearly every religious community in Kyrgyzstan participated in the discussion, expressing views, both positive and negative, about the draft law and proposed restrictions. Evgeniy Grechko, a religion and legal expert working with the minority Christian groups, argued strongly against the changes, pointing out the potentially detrimental effect on small churches across the nation. Grechko argued that the requirement of 200 "founders" needed for registration would be the highest in Central Asia, pointing out that even "dictatorial Turkmenistan dropped its requirement from 500 to just five a few years ago." Grechko also stated that the minority Christians were willing to work with the government to curb the spread of extremism, which was the stated reason for the draft law.

EXPRESSIONS OF DESPAIR FROM CHRISTIAN LEADERS

14. (C) Baptist Pastor Alexander Shumilin and Catholic priest Nikolai Mesmer told Poloff that their attempts to influence

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the government in favor of more liberal restrictions have failed. Shumilin said that the government had invited him to participate in the working group established to draft the law on religion. However, he said that the invitation, along with the latest roundtable, allowed the government to argue that it supported an open dialogue on the issue and included the minority Christians in the drafting process. Shumilin said that during a private meeting, he tried to convince Osmonaliyev to loosen restrictions proposed in the draft law, but his pleas were "met with the same rhetoric heard in previous roundtables." Father Mesmer criticized the Kyrgyz government for its efforts to "stifle freedom of religion" and expressed his concern that Catholic churches could also be affected by the draft law. Another Baptist pastor told Poloff he believed that the presentations of Sabirov and Sadykov were a clear sign that the presidential administration and parliament would back the draft law.

HEAD OF SARA NOW OPPOSED TO STRICT REGULATIONS?

15. (C) During a February 25 meeting with Ambassador, SARA head Osmonaliyev said he personally did not see the need for the 200-member minimum registration requirement. He observed that limiting the ability to register would only create more illegal organizations operating in the country. This, he believed, would lead to more conflict and less control over the religious situation. He promised to meet with the draft law working group on February 27 to discuss the option of leaving the registration requirement unchanged at the current ten members.

WORKING GROUP MEETING

16. (C) Valentin Shaipov, pastor and representative of the Union of Evangelical Christian Churches, provided Poloff with readout from the February 27 working group meeting. He said that Osmonaliyev announced that the decree on religious

regulation (see Ref A) had been withdrawn and that SARA would now focus on completing the draft law and submitting it to parliament before the end of March. During the working group, religious leaders submitted proposals on the draft law, but SARA refused to comment or indicate which provisions would be included. Shaipov said that representatives of the Muftiate, Russian Orthodox Church, and minority Christian groups agreed that the registration requirement of 200 members was discriminatory and unacceptable. He said that SARA representatives, including Osmonaliyev, welcomed the opinions of the working group but declined to reveal their decisions.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) Contrary to earlier statements that it would take several months to complete the draft law, SARA seems poised to complete and submit the draft law to parliament within a month. Minority Christian leaders saw the withdrawal of the (reportedly more restrictive) draft decree as a positive sign, but remain concerned about the final form of the draft law. One question left unanswered is whether existing organizations would have to re-register under the new regulations. Pastor Shumilin told us that Osmonaliyev refused to respond to the question during a private meeting between them. While we remain concerned about the proposed restrictions, we were somewhat encouraged by Osmonaliyev's view that the high registration requirement -- which would negatively affect smaller churches -- could be counterproductive. Unfortunately, he failed to share this view with the working group. The Embassy will follow up with Osmonaliyev and will continue to track this issue closely.

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